DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 473 640 CE 084 520

AUTHOR	Wilson, Arthur L.; Kiely, Richard C.
TITLE	Towards a Critical Theory of Adult Learning/Education: Transformational Theory and Beyond.
PUB DATE	2002-06-00
NOTE	7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Adult Education Research Conference (43rd, Raleigh, NC, May 24-26, 2002).
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Literature Reviews; Adult Education; *Adult Learning; Adult Students; Andragogy; *Critical Thinking; Educational Research; Educational Researchers; *Educational Theories; Experiential Learning; Learning Strategies; *Learning Theories; *Lifelong Learning; Postsecondary Education; Power Structure; Social Environment; Teacher Role; Teacher Student Relationship; *Transformative Learning
IDENTIFIERS	Brookfield (Stephen); Mezirow (Jack)

ABSTRACT

Empirical research on adult learning conducted by Jack Mezirow in the 1970s was revolutionary and groundbreaking and contributed to the creation of a critical theory of adult learning. His influence has remained at the forefront of adult education theory for over two decades. It is timely to consider whether other empirical research has contributed in like manner to the field of adult learning. A selective review of transformational literature suggested that little innovation equal to the significance of Mezirow's work has occurred. Although empirical studies have added to the field's understanding of different aspects of transformational learning, most have only re-worked or tinkered with Mezirow's pioneering studies. Significant issues that require continued attention in constructing a critical theory of adult learning/education are the following: (1) a conceptual understanding of self-society relations; (2) greater understanding of the role of power in the interaction between teacher and adult learner; and (3) a lessening of the mechanism of "dialog" in critical adult learning. (Included is one table that compares Mezirow's key points with those of these four contemporary researchers: Stephen Brookfield, M. Hart, E. Tisdell, M. Welton. The bibliography lists 23 references). (AJ)

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Towards a Critical Theory of Adult Learning/Education: Transformational Theory and Beyond

Arthur L. Wilson & Richard C. Kiely
Cornell University, USA

ED 473 640

Abstract: Given the great promise of critical theory to transform the field of adult education and its understanding of adult learning, indeed, to create, as Mezirow boldly proclaimed two decades ago, a critical theory of adult learning, where are we now?

Jack Mezirow's empirical work in the 70s and his major theoretical statement in 1981 showed great promise for creating a critical theory of adult learning: "This article represents the beginnings of a critical theory of adult learning" (1981, p. 3), which he argued would provide "the foundation for formulating a comprehensive theory of adult education" (p. 16). Mezirow was the first in American adult education to use the critical theories of Jurgen Habermas and Paulo Freire (Collard & Law, 1991) to promote critical reflection as central to transforming our learning from experience. Mezirow's thinking provided a significant challenge to academic orthodoxy by making the central task of adult education the critique of assumptions through critically reflective learning. His theoretical proposals, at the time tagged to andragogy, actually initiated a series of attacks on the "andragogical consensus" (Welton, 1995). Since then, critical theory (that of Mezirow and others) has contributed to revealing and widening the gap between the neutered and neutralizing professionalization of academic adult education represented by the andragogical consensus and the more serious questions that began appearing in the 70s about what the real purpose of adult education should be.

Little appeared in print in the early and mid 80s as Mezirow's perorations of Habermas began percolating through graduate schools. Academic adult educators soon found, though, in Mezirow's thinking ways to rethink questions whose answers continue to remain elusive to the field: what makes adults adult; how to make a case for the uniqueness of "adult" learning; how to understand and explain adult learning beyond the dominance of behaviorist, cognitive, and humanist perspectives; even how to interpret adult learning in radical social movements. As the 80s closed a number of dissertations were being completed and the first substantive theoretical critiques began appearing (Taylor, 2000). The 90s saw a waxing then waning of the theoretical debates as dissertations piled up offering mostly confirmation of the existence of transformational learning and incremental refinements to theory itself. Throughout Mezirow has remained attentive and responsive, offering encouragement and rebuttal, as he too incrementally refined his thinking. Recently Mezirow (2000) published a collection of his thoughts and collaborator comments significantly subtitled "Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress." Given the great promise of critical theory to transform the field of adult education and its understanding of adult learning, indeed, to create, as Mezirow boldly proclaimed two decades ago, a critical theory of adult learning, where are we now? The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the project first posed by Mezirow: What progress have we made toward creating a critical theory of adult learning/education? The paper has three parts. First we provide a brief assessment of the continuing empirical work on transformational theory. Second, since Mezirow's views need no rehearsing, we turn to other work to ask how it has contributed to a critical theory of adult learning (space severely restricts our selection). From the vantage of

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these assessments, we conclude with what we think are significant issues requiring attention to continue constructing a critical theory of adult learning/education.

The Promise of Transformation Theory

Having spent considerable effort assessing the empirical work to show that in itself that work has not been substantively critical, Taylor's (2000) most recent review summarizes how this emerging empirical work confirms, extends, and differs from the various dimensions of Mezirow's transformational learning theory in such areas as critical reflection, frames of reference, context, ways of knowing, and the process of perspective transformation. Empirical studies have not, however, advanced "unresolved issues" and tensions in transformational learning theory that were highlighted in the theoretical literature: "there has been a redundancy of research, an insufficiency of in-depth exploration into the nature of particular components of a perspective transformation and a reification of transformative learning theory as we presently know it, whereby its basic premises about learning have become accepted practice in adult education" (Taylor, 2000, p. 286). Although these empirical studies have added to our understanding of different aspects transformational learning theory, it is interesting to note that earlier Taylor highlighted the lack of empirical base for evaluating social action and power in transformational learning theory as the "the most controversial issue concerning transformative learning theory" (1998, p. 22). Empirical studies continue to prod and tinker with various components of Mezirow's transformational learning process, while ignoring the structural referents of context that shape the individual transformation learning process. This assessment of the empirical work shows that the major theoretical challenges to transformational theory (e.g., Clark & Wilson, 1991; Collard & Law, 1989; Hart, 1990; Newman, 1994; Tennant, 1993; Welton, 1995) have had relatively little impact on the continuing construction of empirical work or the theory itself, as Mezirow's (2000) recent collection demonstrates.

Ironically, we find ourselves epistemologically and theoretically "stuck" in the history of Mezirow's transformational learning theory and reliving it. Without a strong empirical base to judge theoretical claims regarding the critical and social emancipatory potential of transformational learning, we have unwittingly and uncritically assimilated Mezirow's theory without an explicit social vision to guide us in "learning our way out." The current state of affairs leaves adult educators with an endless array of modern tools and techniques for transforming the minds of adult learners more effectively and efficiently with the vague hope that individual transformation will somehow lead to social change. By continuing to "romance individual adult learners" (Cervero & Wilson, 2001), perspectives may shift and some may also "successfully reintegrate" into society, but the status quo will likely remain unchallenged, leaving fundamental questions regarding systemic distortions and inequities in late capitalism, patriarchy, and the colonization of the lifeworld unaddressed.

Beyond Transformation Theory

There is no underestimating the enormous contribution Mezirow's transformational theory has made in moving us out of the apolitical doldrums of the andragogical consensus and inspiring us to think deeply about how we understand adult learning and education. Fortunately, as well, there are others who by both moving beyond transformational theory and invoking other critical traditions have addressed some of these "unresolved issues" in the promising movement to create a critical theory of adult learning and education. Inspired by Collard and Law (1991) our point is to begin drawing out less visible contributors who provide significant insights into

developing the promise of critical theory in order to move us beyond the dominant theoretical and practical parameters of transformational theory as currently constituted. Given the limits of the AERC venue and knowing academic adult educators' infatuation with comparative charts, we have space only to include a summary of theories and practices (see Table 1). Contributors are arrayed on the top horizontal axis (our justification for selecting them appears in the next paragraph). The left vertical axis represents various dimension of each contributor's depiction of issues contributing to a critical theory of adult learning and education, including each theorist's social vision, understanding of the focus and learning problem, the definition of critical adult learning and education, educators' roles, and processes and outcomes of critical learning. These rows also address issues we'd like to address specifically in this paper, including each theorist's understanding of structure-agency relations and power.

Our selection of contributors is of course selective and partial (although partially continuous with Collard & Law's 1991 assessment); we have no illusions about being "comprehensive." Given the range of possibility, we focused on the following contributors as significant. Of particular importance is Michael Welton's prolonged project to understand and promote "the centrality of emancipatory adult learning theory to social transformation and human freedom" (1995, pp. 1-2). Well known for championing Habermasian discourse communities, we believe his work represents a comprehensive accounting of the second generation of the Frankfurt School. We likewise turn to the work of Mechthild Hart (e.g., 1992, 2001) whose long term interest in how capitalistic and patriarchal power relations distort female consciousness seems to us central to a project of creating a critical theory of adult learning. Similarly we look at Elizabeth Tisdell's (e.g., 1998, 2000) poststructuralist focus on the construction of identity in interlocking systems of gender, race, and class. We also include the recent work of Stephen Brookfield (e.g., 2000, 2002) who, via returning to the historical roots of ideological critique in the first generation thinkers of the Frankfurt School, has taken transformational theory in more overtly politicized directions by repositioning ideological critique as central to transformative learning. From this discussion we begin to draw a different view of what a critical theory of adult learning and education might look like than if we restrict our view to transformational theory, one concerned with specific politicized outcomes rather than one focused mostly on the process of individual transformation.

Table 1 represents a number of comparative points. At a superficial level, interpretations of critical theory can often sound and look the same. After all, the central issues tend to be oppression, social justice, democracy, dialog, all of which are visible in the contributors presented here. But we have constructed the table to show difference when possible. Our sense is that too many American adult educators, when they take account of critical theory at all, tend to see it in monolithic terms, as chiefly emulated in transformational theory. As pointed out (e.g., Collard & Law, 1989; Hart 1990), Mezirow's appropriation of Habermas is selective. To which we would add, points of view represented here both incorporate a broader and more nuanced appropriation of first and second generation critical theory and move beyond it as well. A few observations. As Gore (1993) has shown in education, there is a similar gender split in critical adult education analyses. In that regard, those drawing most directly on the Frankfurt School (Mezirow, Welton, Brookfield) are firmly entrenched in its (male) rationalist domain, whereas Hart and Tisdell incorporate but move beyond critical rationalism to advocate inclusive, connected, affective alliances to respond to systemic distortion and oppression. Second, only recently have we begun to see empirical analyses (e.g., Foley, 1999; Youngman, 2000) to further our understandings and practices of what it means to resist and transform oppressive and unjust

Table 1: Moving Beyond Transformational Theory

	Mezirow	*Welton*	*Hart*	*Tisdell*	*Brookfield*
Social Vision	Personal Autonomy, Democratic Consensus	Collective Autonomous Learning Society	Critical Caring Society	Inclusive Society	Democratic Socialism
Focus	Meaning-Making & Assumptions	Civil Society & Discourse Democracy	Motherwork: Family, Work & Society	Positionality, Identity & Spirituality	Ideology Critique
Problem	Distorted Psycho-Cultural Assumptions	Colonization of Lifeworld	Marginalization: Capitalism & Patriarchy	Interlocking Systems of Gender, Race, Class Oppression	Hegemony: Self Duping by Power & Ideology
Critical Adult Learning	Critical Self-Reflection & Dialogue	Critical Learning Turn: Discursive Practices & Social Action	Consciousness-Raising; Mapping Relations of Power	Creating Inclusive Learning for Expressing "Selves	Critique of "Willing Conformity"
Educator's Role	Facilitator	Social Critic & Social Activist	Consciousness-Raiser & Power-Cartographer	Reflexive Deconstructor	Pragmatic Problematizer
Processes & Outcomes	Foster Critical Reflection & Dialogue: Perspective Transformation	Learn Democratic Discursive Practices to Defend Lifeworld, to Ally with New Social Movements	Cross Borders: Develop "Mestiza" Consciousness to Build Allies with Those on Margins	Cross Borders: Reclaim "Authentic Self" & Develop "Third Eye"	Critical Reflection & Democratic Discussion to Illuminate Power to "See" Hegemony
Self-Society Relations	Self → Society	Structure → Agency	Society ↔ Self	"Self" ↔ "Society"	Society → Self
Power	Autonomy & Self Control	Political Economy & Global Capitalism: Structural Redistribution	Political Economy & Patriarchy: Workplace Motherwork	Interlocking Relations of Power: Seeing Positionality	Hegemony: Personal is Structural

structures. Finally, as Brookfield (1994) has noted, there is a "dark side" to critical theory. The practice of critical theory – rationalist, emotist, positionist – entails an explicit political focus that challenges relations of power and hegemonic cultural relations. This type of learning can be profoundly emotional and debilitating, especially in challenging long held and uncritically

assumptions – never mind the very real, sometimes life-threatening risks of embodying such challenges.

From the vantage of these assessments, we can indicate what we think are significant issues which require continued attention in constructing a critical theory of adult learning/education. First, we believe the various *conceptual* understandings of self-society relations continues to trouble the construction of a critical theory of adult learning (nearly any derivative of critical theory begins with a critique of the unjustness of social relations but not necessarily an understanding of *how* those relations are constituted). Thus many contributors tend to privilege one side of the equation over the other; indeed, the notion that there is some sort of formulaic and clearly individuated "psychology" and "sociology" of adult learning undermines a critical understanding of adult learning. Anthony Giddens (1984) has argued convincingly for what he calls the duality of structure, meaning that social life is recursive (not binary) in that our social practices both produce consequences as they reproduce themselves. This plaguing problem of structure-agency must be overcome in any understanding of a critical theory of adult learning. Second, with the exception of Mezirow's work, many discussions of critical adult learning incorporate power and its effects. But oddly notions of power are typically weakly theorized (there are significant exceptions), nor do understandings of critical learning provide many insights (beyond the anecdotal anyway) into practically managing power's effects in our everyday work with adult learners, particularly in terms of the construction of our social lives and the construction of meaning from experience. Finally, we have become increasingly concerned about the nearly ubiquitous calls for "dialog" as a mechanism for critical adult learning. We remain unconvinced. Given the related problems of understanding society and managing power, calls for dialog would seem to largely reproduce rather than mollify systems of inequity.

We believe the promise of critical theory for a critical theory of adult learning and education will continue germinating. To do so, though, will require attending to such matters as developing practical understandings of structure-agency issues, of managing power practically, and developing a continuing array of critically practical interventions. Of course, today much academic adult education remains thoroughly ensconced (and seemingly quite happily so) in the theoretical confines of 60s/70s' understanding of teaching the individual learner: humanist developmental psychology, andragogical learning theory, and professional practice defined as procedural educational expertise (needs assessment, teaching and facilitation skills, budgeting and marketing skills, evaluation tactics, etc.). So we argue that without a practical theory of critical learning, the profession of adult education will become increasingly irrelevant to and ineffectual in addressing the increasingly complex demands of adult educators to broker knowledge/power relations in their practice (Cervero & Wilson, 2001).

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Organization/Address: University of Georgia	Telephone: 706-542-1189 FAX: 706-542-4024
	E-Mail Address: rkiely@coe.uga.edu Date: 2/10/03

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